



A STRANGE NIGHT-WATCHMAN. A STORY OF NORTHERN INDIA.

BY DAVID KER.

"SAFE at last!"

So fervently were the words pronounced that one might well have expected to see the man who uttered them dragging himself upon a rock out of a raging sea, spurring his fainting horse into a broad lake, just as the hot, stifling smoke of the burning prairie came sweeping around them, or darting breathless through the gateway of an English fort, to which he had been hunted by a score of yelling Afghan robbers. But, on the contrary, the speaker was alighting from a mud-splashed "dák gharri" (post-chaise) at the door of a handsome country-house in one of the hill-districts of Northern India.

However, Mr. Tremmell had good reason to speak as he did. Naturally a very nervous man, and quite unused to Eastern traveling, he looked upon all India as one great menagerie, with a "ravening tiger" crouching behind every tree, and a boa-constrictor, as long as a ship's cable, hidden in every thicket. To add to his troubles, he had just been staying with an old English colonel, of the —th Bengal Native Infantry, who was himself so fond of shooting that it never

occurred to him that another might not care so much for the sport.

Accordingly, poor Mr. Tremmell was marched out, night after night, into the most dangerous parts of the jungle, and kept standing there in pitch darkness, with his boots full of ants, and half a dozen big thorns running into him, expecting every moment to be gobbled up at one mouthful by a tiger, or a bear, or trampled by a wild elephant or some other horrible creature, the very name of which made him shiver. At last, after a week of this torture, he felt that he must escape or die; so hastily thanking the colonel for "a most delightful visit," he traveled as fast as he could go, to the house of another friend, a day's journey farther north. This friend, being a missionary, was not likely to have either time or inclination for hunting wild beasts.

All night long our unlucky hero was jolted and bumped from side to side, as his rickety post-chaise rumbled and tumbled along the break-neck mountain roads, which (as any one who has tried them will admit) provide uncommonly rough traveling.



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But when he came up to the Mission House, a little after sunrise, all his troubles were forgotten in the joyful prospect of being for a while perfectly secure. The Rev. Titus J. Romer and his three bright-eyed boys came out to welcome their guest, and marched him in to a very plentiful "chota hazri" (little breakfast), to which the guest, relieved from all fear that he himself might furnish a breakfast for some hungry young tiger, did ample justice.

And what a delightful place the Mission House was! The three or four enormous palms, that overshadowed its low roof, kept it cool and comfortable, even under the burning heat of an Indian sun, while close to the door a tiny river went dancing and sparkling in the sunlight, seeming to make everything fresh and green as it rippled on. Close to the water's edge, a group of slim, brown, sharp-featured Hindus, in white turbans and cotton trousers, were smoking their long pipes beneath the shade of a broad-leaved banana palm. All along both banks of the river great clumps of feathery bamboos, slender and elastic as monster fishing-poles, rose fifty feet and more into the air.

The house stood upon high ground, and from his comfortable rocking-chair in its broad, shady veranda, Mr. Tremmell had a splendid view. Miles away to the south loomed the grim, gloomy hills over which he had been struggling all night. Around him stretched a vast green plain, in the center of which the white, flat-roofed houses of the little district-town peeped through a mass of dark, glossy leaves. High over all towered along the northern sky a mighty wall of purple mountains. Above these glittered, like frosted silver, the eternal snows of the Himalayas.

"This is something like!" muttered Mr. Tremmell that night, as he lay down to sleep in a cool, well-aired bedroom looking out upon the river. "*Here*, at least, I shall have a chance of being quiet, instead of having the very life worried out of me with that wretched hunting! If *that's* to be the way of it, one might as well be the keeper of a zoölogical garden; but, by good luck, here there are no tigers, no bears, no wild elephants, and above all, no snakes!"

Poor Mr. Tremmell! he was rejoicing too soon. Scarcely had the word "snakes" left his tongue, when he caught sight of something moving upon the floor. It glistened in a curious way, like the reflection of a candle's flame upon a wet window-

pane. A second glance "brought his heart into his mouth," as he saw a huge black-and-yellow snake, more than six feet long, gliding out from under the bed within a yard of the spot where he sat!

To say that Mr. Tremmell was frightened would be putting it mildly, indeed; for any sculptor in search of a model for a statue of "Horror" would have given all the money he had about him for one glimpse of Mr. T.'s countenance at that moment. So utterly was he scared that he sat stock-still, with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open, as if expecting the snake to jump right down his throat—which, apparently, the snake might easily have done without his stirring either hand or foot to prevent it.

The serpent, on its part, seemed at a loss what to make of *him*, and stared at him for some moments without moving, till at last, as if tired of doing nothing, it suddenly glided right toward him. Then the spell was broken, and he sprang up with a yell, compared to which the whoop of an Indian "brave" on the war-path would have been hardly worth mention.

There was a clamor of voices, a tramp of hurrying feet, and into the room burst Mr. Romer, his three sons, and half a dozen Hindu servants. One moment of bewilderment, and then came laughter that seemed to shake the whole house.

"So sorry, my dear fellow," cried Mr. Romer; "I really ought to have told you. That's our pet snake, 'Dickie.' He goes about at night to catch mice and things of that sort. He's one of the kind they call 'house-snakes.' They are quite harmless; and we find him very useful. Here, Tom! put Dickie out on the veranda."

The boy picked up the snake as coolly as if it had been a piece of rope, and marched off with Dickie hanging over his arm like a shawl.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am that this should have happened, Tremmell," said the missionary. "And I hope it won't spoil your visit, I'm sure."

It *did* spoil it, however, for Mr. Tremmell was so thoroughly upset by his fright and the thought of being laughed at by the boys (who seemed to think the whole affair a capital joke) that he left the house the very next day, declaring that "he could stand anything in reason, but he *could n't* stand a snake as a night-watchman."